

# Jeff Thomas's three decades of 'Bear Portraits' trace the evolution of his son from child to grown up member of A Tribe Called Red



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1984, "Culture Revolution" Toronto, Ontario

Courtesy of the artist

The sidewalk near Queen and Spadina in downtown Toronto teemed with people on a hot day in 1984 as Jeff Thomas stepped down an alley to photograph his son, Bear. The little boy had been bugging his dad to show him how to use the darkroom, and his father thought it important that he learn with a photograph of himself.

Bear wore a baseball cap with an image by Edward Curtis, a photographer who documented North American indigenous peoples in the early 20th century. Serendipitously, someone had spray painted "Culture revolution" on the brick wall. Bear stood next to these words and the shutter closed, capturing the first of "The Bear Portraits."



1990, "Little White Lies" Winnipeg, Manitoba

Courtesy of the artist





1990, "Indian Treaty No. 1" Lower Fort Garry, Manitoba.

Courtesy of the artist

For the past three decades, First Nations artist Thomas, now 59, has been photographing his son, now DJ Bear Witness of Juno Award winning electronic band A Tribe Called Red. Although the Bear Portraits span many years, it is not an extensive series, and Thomas says making them has usually been spontaneous. These portraits are part of the artist's exploration of what it means to be indigenous. Thomas self-identifies as "urban-Iroquois," a term he coined to recognize his experience growing up in cities rather than on reserves.

The photographer's work is featured in collections across North America and Europe, and has been shown in exhibitions including the National Gallery of Canada's 2013 show *Sakahàn*, the largest-ever exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art.

For the Bear Portraits, the artist usually presents his son in an urban context in contrast to symbols of colonization, and alongside racist representations of indigenous peoples as seen in advertisements, monuments and historical images. His work has a playful quality, but also addresses systemic racism. Thomas recalls that as a child he had a difficult time "making sense of being Indian in a society that was built on racism," saying, "Photography gave me a way to begin to unravel the mystery."



2007, "Trackside" Gatineau, Quebec

Courtesy c

For Thomas, photographing his son in the city was a way to ensure Bear felt he had a place off the reserve. He says, "When I made photographs, I wasn't just making photographs of Bear for my work. It was a way of teaching him how to look at his relationship to the world around him."

Bear, now 37, is an enthusiastic participant in his father's work. He loves to see Thomas the moment he snaps the photograph, "It's such a beautiful thing to watch." Growing up, he carefully selected outfits, which often included T-shirts with political messages, on the days his father would be photographing him. "When my dad was hunting for evidence of indigenous people in the urban landscape and not finding it," he says, "I was a way to inject that."

Bear and his father's work have parallel themes, and the two men have learned from each other. "(Bear) had a significant impact on the way that I looked at my responsibility as an image-maker," Thomas says. "He's always in the back of my mind. Whatever I've done, it's been about that relationship. He gave me purpose in life."



2013, "Major's Hill Park (aka - Major's Hill Indian Reserve) with Apaci Chief" Ottawa, Ontario

Courtesy of the artist

A Tribe Called Red is on a Canadian Tour, which includes free concerts at First Nations Reserves. They play Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square Aug. 12. For more information, visit [atribecalledred.com/tour](http://atribecalledred.com/tour).

Jeff Thomas's work will be featured in the upcoming exhibition A Necessary Fiction: The Portrait, at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery Sept. 17 to Oct. 29.